

Episode 38: Temptaous Mckoy

Transcript

Welcome to Pedagogue, a podcast about teachers talking writing. I'm your host, Shane Wood.

In this episode, I talk with Temptaous Mckoy about technical and professional communication, amplification rhetorics, Historically Black Colleges and Universities (HBCUs), embodiment, and future directions for technical and professional communication, and rhetoric and composition as a field.

Temptaous Mckoy, from Spring Lake, North Carolina, is an Assistant Professor of English with a focus in Technical and Professional Communication, as well as the Co-coordinator of Graduate Studies in the Department of Language, Literature, and Cultural Studies at Bowie State University. Her research focuses on redefining the field of TPC and challenging it to be more inclusive of the (in)formal communicative and learning practices as found in Black communities, such as HBCUs. She is an HBCU alum (Elizabeth City State Univ.) and also a member of Sigma Gamma Rho Sorority, Inc. She obtained her BA in English from Elizabeth City State University ('13); her MA in Professional Communication and Leadership ('15) from Armstrong State University (Now GA Southern at Armstrong); and her PhD in Rhetoric, Writing, and Professional Communication from East Carolina University ('19).

Temptaous, thanks so much for joining us.

SW: I want to start by talking about your award-winning dissertation “Y'all Call it Technical and Professional Communication, We Call it #ForTheCulture” which focuses on Amplification Rhetorics (AR) and AR practices in Black communities. You offer AR as a theoretical framework for Technical and Professional Communication to highlight the rich rhetorical practices in Black communities. Do you mind talking more about this work and its implications for Technical and Professional Communication as a field, but also technical and professional writing classes?

TM: Yeah, so really what I realized, and this is just my transparent moment, I did not want to have to create another theory. But when you get to the academy you learn if you want to make something legit around here, you got to theorize it or else people don't believe it's real for some reason. I realized I needed to play the game with the academy, but also pull in my community. So Amplification Rhetorics (AR) looks at those rhetorical practices, specifically in Black communities, that are based out of lived experiences, cultural, and differences are the things that make that culture what it is, or in this case Black culture. And actually that personal agency of being Black. What does it mean to be Black? So it's this big, broad idea that I tried to bring in together because I don't like to present Black people as just one monolithic.

“We just black, we all black.” No, we all got different ways of doing it. So I wanted to amplify that. And when I realized tech comm is still a white dude's thing, it is what it is, and as I read a lot of the scholarship, I struggled to find myself in it. I struggled really hard to find what it was that the people were really talking about. So my background is actually in radio production. I was doing mass comm in undergrad and I was ready to graduate and I got a degree in English.

That's a whole nother story for another day. But I realized I was not seeing myself in this scholarship that they were speaking of. And I realized also that a lot of the work we were talking about did not tell us what it looked like in practice. But then I also realized, Black people have been doing a whole lot of this stuff. Right? So when you're listening to your favorite, the Cha-Cha Slide, right? That's a Black song, everybody can get out there, they're communicating in move or in action, which a lot of times that's what technical communication's doing. It's communicating move, it's communicating actions, it's providing direction and instruction. So when we removed this box of tech comm being software manuals, or this classic engineering box that some people are still maneuvering in, and we understand it as a way to communicate action to people, then you have a whole nother thing that we're looking at when we're looking at Black communities.

I had this theoretical framework, I'm pulling it out right now, it's called tacit technical communication. So what ways do people communicate to one another that is strictly connected to a community that other people don't understand, right? It's the FUBU of tech comm. Just because you don't get it doesn't mean that it's not considered tech comm. So when I did my digital chapter at Trap Karaoke, my committee actually went to a Trap Karaoke event, which is a very Black event.

And Dr. Michelle Eble and Dr. Erin Frost and their husbands and partners, they decided to join us at Trap Karaoke. And there was a moment when they needed to get through the crowd to leave, and I left them. But it wasn't like I was like, "To hell with y'all." And left them. It was more so I was navigating through the crowd. And then I noticed when I turned around, they were stuck on the backside of the crowd. I didn't get them.

And when I reflected on it, I realized that was one little small way that Black people learn how to move through spaces very early on, but it's never communicated...to how to do it. You're not stepping on each other's shoes, you're not in each other's space. You're moving through that space in a way that's very fluid. Right? And it's not communicated. Whereas I started to realize y'all were...well, y'all as in my white committee members, were so used to doing like the, "Excuse me, pardon me. Hey mama."

And I was like, "Y'all ass is going to be stuck on the backside of that crowd all day if you 'excuse me' and pardon your way through that crowd." So I say all that to say, Black communities have a way of communicating with one another that is so exclusive and that are so reliant upon that community knowledge and that culture. That it doesn't necessarily kick you out of it, but it does recognize that you're just not a part of it. So that's what I like to do in my work.

SW: So one thing I'm thinking about is how our field rhetoric and composition creates and maintains exclusionary spaces. Right? How often journals and editorial boards are exclusive. Yet we as a field say we value diversity and inclusivity, but so often that's attached to special issues in journals. And that's problematic. Asking questions about whose voice is heard and whose is absent, is something we should always be doing.

TM: And you want to know what I recognize, it's crazy, right? As a Black woman in the Academy, right, I read things that I can't see myself in it, but I'm still assumed to, or I still have

to do the labor to find where it works. Right? I realized when you flip it the other way, when there are scholars who are not from marginalized communities don't see themselves in it, they dismiss the work as being legit.

I'm realizing that as I continue to go, and it's really amazing to me, some people just don't know how to not be included in something. So it's just something I've always been trying to think of like, the best way to address it and pull that thought process apart.

SW: You teach first-year writing, technical writing, and developmental writing at Bowie State University, a public Historically Black College and University (HBCU) in Maryland. I was hoping you could spend some time talking about the mission and culture at Bowie State and how you approach teaching writing.

TM: So about 3000 students, but we are a commuter's college. So a lot of our students don't live on campus. We have a MARC Train station, literally on campus. So students are coming in from all parts of the DMV. What I love about it is, I went to Elizabeth City State University in North Carolina, fairly small as well, but there's a tighter sense of community there. So that's what I love about Bowie State. Smaller classrooms, students are much more together, but you still get that same classic HBCU community, Greek life, all of these things that come with going to an HBCU. What I love about being at Bowie is...the radio station is in my building. So as y'all can imagine, I just was living for that when I started there, because that means I can go downstairs and listen to the music when I want to.

But Bowie does a really good job of bringing in students from different walks of life. So I went to East Carolina University as well for my PhD, rural eastern North Carolina college. And I've already shared my experiences with many people, but I was burnt the hell out once I was done teaching there. I was over it and I was tired of some of the microaggressions I was dealing with and facing. So I was happy to get back to an HBCU where some of those things...I did not have to deal with.

I'm teaching first year writing, as you mentioned, first-year writing, developmental writing and technical report writing. And we're in the process of revising these courses right now to match the current climate. But the technical and report writing ... so there were already some stuff that was in place when I got there, and now I'm bringing in additional knowledge about what I know for tech comm. One thing that I have been doing a lot lately, because being the new kid on the block, you can't come in and just burn stuff down. You just can't, you got to sit and wait and then you can do some stuff.

But what I've done in my classes since music is my first love, a lot of times my classes are built around music. This previous semester, I gave students a song that they were supposed to become a business enterprise representing these people for this song. And then it turned into a whole nother project. What I've learned about the students at Bowie State, is that they really like to produce products or writing or anything like that, that they can use in their portfolios. We're working with a generation of students that genuinely understand what it means to have a portfolio of your work and to show that work. But then also in those technical and report writing classes, those students, I've learned they really enjoy creating stuff that has them engaging with

their peers. They really love to create a flyer, and then I say, "Hey, go out and get feedback from some random person. Don't ask me, because I'm going to give you teacher feedback. Go ask someone else what it looks like." I think that's also one of the beauties to me being so close to DC is I've already started to talk with people about, "Hey, can I partner up with you to have my students working alongside with you, to get their hands and dibble and dabble into tech comm?"

One of the saddest things that I can say, and I can speak on this, is our technical report writing class we're now ... like I said, we're trying to revise it because it has such a high fail rate. Again, I'm new I don't know what the hell happened. I just came in and it was happening. But in the process of revising it and catching more of that student feedback, we're starting to see where the hiccups was or where people are having issues. And what I've learned just from my quick year is that we've had to switch the focus from being grammar situated. Those traditional writing, writing for clarity, like certain stuff that already creates barriers against Black students already was the primary focus. And then once we started to shift to students' knowledge being the primary focus of the class, allowing the students to create the projects.

Like, I'll give you the assignment sheet, but I always tell people, "You put your students outside in the fence and let them run around. Because you put them on a leash and they can't grow. They can't do anything. They're only going to go so far. But if you put them in a fence y'all, they'll ... you have one kid over here in the corner doing something he ain't got no business. But somebody will be over here doing what they need to do." So in situating our students' knowledge first I realized our students are actually growing and learning so much more from our technical report writing class.

SW: So what's the next step for technical comm at Bowie State?

TM: I'm praying and I'm hoping that we can continue to have a student first centralized focus in those courses, because we're starting to try to see about having a certificate in technical writing. That's what we're working towards because right now the only HBCU that even has a concentration in it would be North Carolina A&T. So PWI still got that thing on lock. So we're trying to forge ways to bring tech comm into these primarily white spaces or give our students a different idea of what tech comm is.

I think a lot of my students they're so jaded or scorned from what they think the class is, but then here comes this little Black lady talking about trap music is tech comm and then connecting it to these other ideas, then they're ready to engage with. And I think that's probably where we shoot ourselves in the foot as a field, where we get so stuck in who we are and what we know as our knowledge, that we don't expose our students to other ideas of tech comm.

If I went into my class and I only taught from this damn book that I don't like, then my students would not understand this T-shirt business that they have, can also be branched out into a tech company. I will tell you nothing else. If you don't know nothing about HBCUs, if you don't report nothing else in your stuff, is that these kids will create a business out of anything. I swear I've never seen so many businesses in my life. But the students never have an opportunity to engage with their businesses in the classroom. So a lot of times I'll bring that in, "Oh, you make

T-shirts? Oh, you do mix tapes? Oh, you do this? Okay, bring it into class. Let's see where it fits in these conversations, because that is how we expand the way that we understand the field."

SW: Your teaching centers on students' embodiment and lived experiences. As an undergraduate, you went to Elizabeth City State University, a public HBCU in North Carolina. And now you're at Bowie State University, an HBCU in Maryland. How does your own experiences as a student at an HBCU inform your embodiment as a teacher at Bowie State University?

TM: So check this out. I was initially going to Florida A&M and then my mom was like, "We can't afford out of state tuition." So I looked at a map and I was like, "Okay, what's the furthest HBCU I can go to in North Carolina?" And Elizabeth City is in the middle of nowhere, but it's 30 minutes outside of Virginia, right? So I was up there miserable as hell that first little college year. But the beauty in that going to Elizabeth City State University, you had to find stuff to do. So you was either going to be that kid that was going to be miserable in your dorm, bored, not doing anything, or you're going to get involved and find stuff to do. One or the other it was bound to happen. And my mom didn't let me have my car. So there went that, I had to find something to do.

I was involved in the modeling troops, whatever dance thing I could do. My first year there, I ran for class president. But those little miniature communities that you create at the HBCU space is one of the most beautiful things I think that could have worked in my favor at Elizabeth City. Once I was there as well, like I mentioned, I did radio production. So for four years I was an on air talent. And that was what I did. That's also where I got my start into voiceover work and learning how to edit everything myself.

So when people watch my dissertation and things of that nature, a lot of people don't know a lot of that voiceover work I did myself. I did it in my closet with my phone, clothes everywhere and all that voiceover work I edited myself. I literally just dropped the tracks on top of it. Being at Elizabeth City State really gave me a drive to get things done and figure out how to do things myself while still relying on my community. But it also taught me, and this is from a faculty lens in looking back, it also taught me that this world ain't going to look out for you, you better do it yourself.

There are a lot of life lessons, friendship lessons, lessons on being "professional," right? And I spoke about this in the article that I did with Brittany Hull and Cecilia Shelton titled, "Dressed but Not Tryin' to Impress" where I discussed how at the HBCU I was "professionalized," right? "Professionalized." You wear your suit, you put your stockings on, you do all of these things to be professional. And then it wasn't until I got out of it that I realized like, "This is coded for whiteness. Y'all tripping." But I didn't have the ethos to push back against that until I got the doctor (PhD) behind my name. I couldn't do that as just regular old Temp. So now that I am a faculty member at an HBCU, those same lessons show up in my classroom. When we're teaching the resume, the damn resume assignment, because you got to teach the resume assignment. Because you think about like, so our students in our tech writing class, their business students, so it was like the same at ECU, but they're business students. So you got to teach them this damn resume and cover letter thing, whatever. What I'm running into here at Bowie State is, I'm

working with other students who have ethnic names just as well as I do. I can say to a student, "Look, my name is Temptaous, I go by Temptaous." But there was a time in my life when I only went by Shawn on professional documents.

And it was actually the reason I decided to go and get my PhD. I applied to a job and I applied with Temptaous and Shawn. Two applications back to back. Just to see, you know, I was bored. And Shawn got a call back. Shawn is a cut down version of my middle name Tashawn. But if you leave the Ta, you still know I'm Black. So I was like, "If I do Shawn, you ain't going to know if I'm Black, boy, girl, it ain't going to matter." Shawn got the call back. And then when I finally called them, they told me I lied on my application. So they rejected anything else after that. That was the push I needed to go get my PhD. When I went to get my PhD, I was actually going to get it on technical communication documents in the workplace. That's what I was going to do because I was going to burn down that system. That was the game plan. But life happens, that did not end up being my research focus any longer.

But when I'm in my class and I'm teaching my students ... I have a student, her name is African because we have a lot of international students. And she goes by a shorter name and she could not figure out what name she wanted to put on her resume. And I realized the power that I had and not in a dictator way, right? That representation matters moment. Because now my students see in front of them, a Black woman named Temptaous that understands when they're saying, "I don't know what name I want to put on my resume. I'm not sure what I want to do here." I'm also in a sorority. My sorority is a racial identity, Sigma Gamma Rho Sorority Incorporated. That is also a racial identity marker. You look at my address, there's a lot of things that I have, and a lot of people know these things that are racial identity markers on our technical documents. So it's always this conversation with my students where I'm trying to get them to see like, "Okay." I never tell a student to not place their government name on the document. But I do have an honest conversation with them about it. "Hey, just letting you know, this is what you up against. Is this what you want to do? Okay, cool. Let me help you do it the right way." And I think going to an HBCU provided me that opportunity to come back and do that.

I think of all the things I could not say at East Carolina University that I can say now at Bowie State, mainly because at East Carolina I may have had two or three Black kids in the class, each class, maybe. So there were a lot of things that I had to be careful of saying, because I knew those kids wouldn't get it. And it's not because I think they were bad students, they just didn't get the cultural references. They may not understand why it would matter to not go by a certain name. Those types of things don't show up in the class with white students, nor do they really understand how they themselves reject racial sounding names. So it becomes a teaching moment when at East Carolina, but then at Bowie State, it becomes a moment for my students to be uplifted, right? So I feel if nothing else, I went to Bowie State to be the teacher that I needed.

SW: What is your vision for HBCUs and Rhetoric and Composition as a field?

TM: Like keeping it all the way one hundred, it would be honestly for people stop acting like we ain't here. That's probably my big overarching thing on that. People don't rock with HBCU till they see themselves wanting to get benefit or diversity, or it's some other buzz word thing that they feel they want to tap into. And I really hate that sometimes HBCUs are overlooked for being

great places for learning and even more so, which is a whole nother book I'm going to get out of my head one day, HBCU elitism is a real thing.

And a lot of people really don't see how that happens. So they only know of the Howard's, the Spelman's, the Morehouse's, the Clark Atlanta's. Those are the things that they know about, but they forget about your Bowie's, Elizabeth City State University, Shaw University, Livingstone. All of these smaller HBCUs are just as important. And I don't say the HBCU elitism flight to knock my other people, because first of all, they already heard my rant about that in the beginning. Because I think it's important that we honor those major HBCUs.

So a lot of people are familiar with the digital chapter [of my dissertation], the video chapter, but there's another chapter on mission statements at HBCUs. So looking at how mission statements from the founding years, all the way up to now serve as technical documents. That's a major part of something I'm looking at. And even in that chapter, I addressed the fact that HBCU elitism is a problem, because we do forget about other HBCUs or small liberal art HBCUs. But my overall vision for the field would be that HBCUs really are being brought into conversations. I'm tired of HBCUs having to be a special topic. That really bothers me. I'm tired of it having to be, "Oh, we got this special panel on HBCUs." Why can't HBCU panels be a part of the party? Don't get it twisted, I'm down for the recognition, but it's always HBCUs are a "but" or a supplemental. And that really bothers me to my core. It's no different than when we talk about African American history like it's not a part of American history.

That tings a special nerve for me. And then now with us looking at tech comm and trying to pull HBCUs into the field of tech comm, there are a lot of behind the scene things like funding, faculty, all of that stuff, that ... you battle on the ground. But when you get into the actual field and the people that we're working with ... I went to CPTSC, I realized you can count the number of Black folks in there on two hands. Maybe just one, if we're being completely honest. But in my two hands I can count the amount of Black people that were in there. And a lot of people already know my social media presence is really big. And I went in on it on Twitter and did not care. Because it's something that people really need to know. So just imagine if HBCUs were looked at and appreciated the same way that we do many of these PWIs, and what would it look like in these conference spaces?

If I was able to bring in 10 of my Black kids from Bowie State to this next conference, what does that mean overall to the organization? Because you're no longer talking about buzzwords, right? But then you also get into another conversation about who's going to go hear about HBCUs? I feel like the work that you're doing is absolutely beautiful. I love it. But then you also think about who are the people who are not going to take the time to listen? Who are people who are not going to take the time to read? It's a constant internal battle where I'm like, are these people worth me fighting with? Do I really feel like talking to them anymore? Because you're not going to hear me regardless. I can't put your face to the book and make you read it. But on the other end, you need to be checked. I appreciate and I love my HBCUs. I feel that they're definitely a sacred space for learning Black community.

And it's the one space in the world that I think back to...and I know people always say it sounds dramatic, but it's the honest to God truth. That's the one space that I can forget that I'm Black. And some people really don't understand the power in that. Not necessarily forget like, "Gurl, I know I'm Black, right?" But it's...I'm not walking around campus thinking about, who am I going to walk into? Do I got to deal with this racist instructor? Am I going to have to be...sitting in a class, reading a book based on race to only hear a white student telling me it doesn't exist? I hate how some people get the game twisted when they say, "Well, you got HBCUs, but why can't we have mainly white colleges?" And I'm like, "Why in the F word is that a debate anymore? Why are we still debating about HBCUs?" Okay, so now we need to have an all-white college? Like, "What the hell is wrong with y'all?"

Because people forget it's white folk at HBCUs. That's always been a thing, and if anyone ever does any research or archival research, and I've learned this, North Carolina A&T is literally the Black version of North Carolina State University. If you look at these founding documents, what these schools came out of, they're literally the same damn school. Just one is a HBCU and one isn't. But when you look at it historically and what that meant, North Carolina got all that funding. NC State got the funding as an R1 whoop-de-doo. But A&T got left behind. So what if we really stopped to peel back these layers and histories about what's happening and how our HBCUs are forgotten? So once we pulled back those histories, then we can start to shoot forward about what it means to include HBCUs in the field of rhet/comp and technical communication. And that's something that I'm really big on. And telling people like, "No, check yourself. Look at the history."

The sense of ideal community is embedded in HBCU. It's there, it's in the threading of an HBCU...is community. And when I look at PWIs and I look at the conversations that's happening, and I look at how we're trying to bring it together, that same sense of community is not embedded in PWIs. I don't want to say it's a free for all, but it's a way that I think PWIs really could learn from HBCUs. I'm saying, literally, just take the time to see what's happening in that HBCU space and what has happened historically to keep that HBCU going afloat.

SW: Thanks, Temptuous. And thank you Pedagogue listeners and followers. Until next time.